

All Saints' Sunday B 2018
November 4, 2018
Fr. Jim Cook

“Your Life Matters!”

In his epic novel *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck wrote:

It seems to me that if you or I must choose
between two courses of thought or action, we
should remember [that we will, one day, die]
and try so to live that our death brings no
pleasure to the world.

I thought this was a good way to begin my sermon for All Saints' Sunday. For that's what we are doing today, observing the Feast of All Saints. And if you are wondering what a “feast day” is, I'll tell you that, if you go back far enough, the word “feast” shares a common root with the modern Spanish word “fiesta.” And so, a feast day is a day when we remember, when we celebrate, and, in the church, a day when we learn.

I've always been particularly fond of All Saints' Day, because it seemed like it was a feast day for all of the rest of us. A “festivus for the rest of us,” if you will. I'll explain what I mean.

If you were to turn, in your prayer books, to page 19, there you would find the roster and calendar of the “official” saints for the Episcopal Church, and the days on which we honor them. And the reason we think of them as saints, is because they were people who did an exceptionally good job of living the sorts of lives that we believe God has called all of us to live. And in many of those cases, they did so despite having had to deal with significant challenges, and great obstacles. And so, for that reason we remember them. And we hold them up as examples of godly living. And, hopefully, we learn from them, and try to emulate them.

However, not *all* saints get to have their own day on a calendar. Rather, they are simply part of that “great cloud of witnesses” whom we remember on *this* day.

Now, when I use that term “witnesses” to describe all those other saints, I don’t mean to suggest that they are hovering around, and watching us. That would be kind of creepy, wouldn’t it? Instead, these are the men and women and children who hover at the fringes of our memory, and whose lives — whose actions and decisions — bears witness to the sort of people they *chose* to be. And they linger in our memories because their lives were

somehow uniquely meaningful to us; because *in* their lives we saw the spark of something unique and precious. And even if no one else noticed it, we did. And so, All Saints' Day is for them.

Now, traditionally, All Saints' Day was intended as a day to remember those saints who had died. But lately, and I think appropriately, it has come to include many who are still alive. And I've grown to appreciate that trend, because it sends what I think is a very important message: and that is, that even while we are still alive, our lives can be meaningful and valuable; that what we do can make a difference; and that who we are, and what we stand for, can count for something. In other words, it sends the message that *every human life can matter!*

It was several years ago that I came to realize that one of the people on my ever-growing list of saints was a man I knew back in Kansas. His name was Chuck Werly, and I'm sure I've mentioned him in sermons here before. But Chuck was one of the nicest and sweetest people I have ever known. He was a smart and creative person of faith. He was very active at the church I served and, after about 15 years of enjoying his friendship, and when Chuck was in his 70s, I had the honor of presiding at his funeral.

But one of the unique things about Chuck, was the fact that he died an old bachelor. And I think it was because he was gay; I mean, he never actually came out and said it, and I think he would have denied it if I had asked. But it became clear to me that, at some point in his early life — perhaps through his family, or even, God help us, through his church — Chuck got the message that being gay was bad. Really, *really* bad. And so he spent a big chunk of his long life really living at odds with a significant part of who he was. And even though we had a lot of oblique conversations on the topic of homosexuality — and make no mistake, they were oblique because Chuck would never have discussed it directly with me — but despite all of those conversations, I was never able to disabuse Chuck of what I considered bad information about his orientation. It was really *such* a tragedy!

And yet, despite all that — despite what I imagine was an incredible burden to have to live with — Chuck was one of the best people I ever knew. The Light of Christ really shone through that man. And so now, he's one of my saints. And that's the thing about All Saints' Day — it's the feast day for the rest of us.

And especially,

for all of us who've been told that we're not good enough, or that we're weird, or that we're an "abomination";

for all of us who've been told that we're unattractive, unappealing, or undesirable;

for all of us who've been rejected, snubbed, spurned, or ignored;

for all of us who've been told that we're stupid or wouldn't amount to anything;

and for all of us who've ever thought "If they knew *that* about me, they wouldn't want to be my friend";

for all of us, in other words, who have been straining under such burdens, and yet somehow managed to cope with all that baggage, and managed to live lives that were meaningful, satisfying, and fulfilling — and by our example helped others to do the same — and who have striven to live lives modeled after the Golden Rule

and the dual commandments about loving God and neighbor; for all of us, All Saints' Day proclaims,

Despite all that junk, which others have foisted on you, your life can still make a difference, because, in God's opinion, your life matters.

Maybe this is a part of what Jesus had in mind when he said,

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take *my* yoke upon you. Let *me* teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.” (Matthew 11: 28-30, *New Living Translation*).

And so, on this All Saints' Sunday, while we're remembering, and giving thanks to God, for all those other people — dead *and* alive — whose lives have made a difference for us; we might want

to pause for a moment, and remember that quote from John Steinbeck that I read to you at the beginning of this sermon: which was . . .

It seems to me that if you or I must choose between two courses of thought or action, we should remember [that we will, one day, die] and try so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world.

Because, if that's how we've tried to live our lives — whether consciously or unconsciously — then we might want to consider, for a moment, the very real possibility that someone, somewhere, is remembering us, and giving thanks to God for us! Because, after all, today is All Saints' Sunday; the feast day for *all* the rest of us.

Amen.